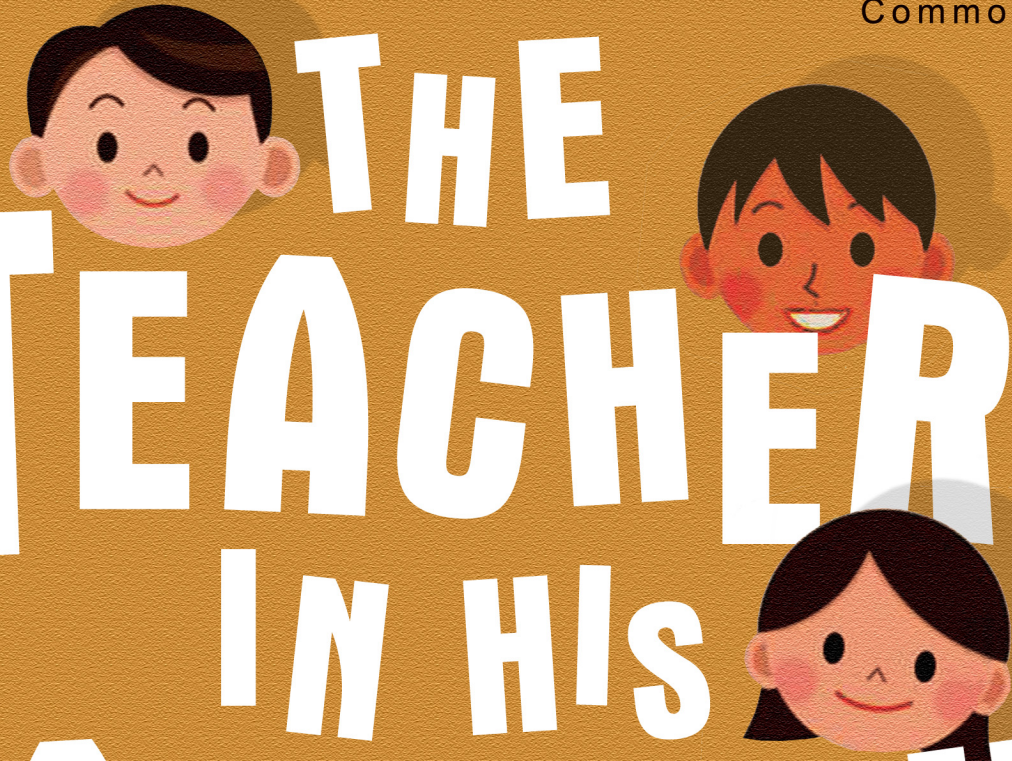


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THE TEACHER IN HIS LABYRINTH



STORIES
AKBAR KAKKATTIL

Translated by

K M SHERRIF

Akbar Kakkattil (1954-2016), one of the most prolific and versatile writers in Malayalam published five novels, thirty one collections of stories, six collections of essays and a play. His publications also include *Sargasameeksha* (On Creativity), a collection of reviews and *Nammude M T* (Our M T), a biographical sketch of the Malayalam writer M T Vasudevan Nair. He has been translated into Tamil and Kannada. Akbar Kakkattil received the Kerala Sahithya Akkademi award twice, for *School Diary*, a collection of sketches; and for *Vadaku Ninnoru Kudumbavriathantham* (Tale of a Family from the North), a novel

K M Sherrif writes in Malayalam and English and translates among Malayalam, English, Gujarati, Hindi and Tamil. His publications include *Kunhupaathumma's Tryst with Destiny*, the first study in English of Vaikom Muhammed Basheer's fiction; *Ekalavyas with Thumbs*, the first selection of Gujarati Dalit Writing in English Translation; and *Cries in the Wilderness*, English translation of a selection of stories by Narayan, the first Adivasi writer to be published in Malayalam. He has also published a selection of short stories, *Bhoothayma* (Spectrality) and a collection of essays on translation, *Anne Frankinte Almaaraattangal* (The Impersonations of Anne Frank) in Malayalam. Sherrif teaches English at the University of Calicut

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Stories

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The Teacher in His Labyrinth

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Glossary

Translator's Preface

Teaching is still one of the most respected professions in God's Own Country – despite all the political twists and turns and the crass commercialization it has gone through in the last half a century. One has only got to see the sudden change in attitude people, especially in the countryside, exhibit when they are told that the apparently faceless man or woman in the crowd at a get-together, wedding or official gathering is a teacher. This, despite the fact that no aura of sacrifice or dedication normally surrounds a teacher today. And, except in the sweat-shops of the average private schools which get no financial assistance from the government, teachers at all levels are relatively well-paid and enjoy job security – a far cry from the Fifties of the last century when most teachers in government-aided private schools could not even be described by the cliché 'wage slaves' – they were not paid for months together! The plight of teachers in private schools in the middle of the last century has been effectively documented by Malayalam fiction. The teacher who steals his student's lunch packet in Karoor Neelakanta Pillai's story "*Pothichoru*" (The Lunch Packet) probably has no parallel in other literatures of the world.

In 1957 the attempt by Joseph Mundasseri, the Minister for Education in the first Communist government in Kerala to set things right by imposing strict curbs on aided private schools to regulate the administration of the schools, to ensure transparency in the appointment of teachers, and to ensure fair service conditions to them including the regular payment of their salaries, met with stiff resistance from the private schools lobby which received unstinted support from the Indian National Congress and a broad spectrum of vested interests on the Right, which included the Catholic church, the beleaguered Savarna feudal elite and the Muslim League. The result was the infamous *vimochana samaram* (liberation struggle) to oust the democratically elected Communist government. The bill did not propose the taking over of private schools by the Government; such a measure was deemed necessary only when the administrators of the schools violated norms laid down in the Bill. Neither was it the first instance of government legislation on private schools. The Congress-led government of Panampilly Govinda Menon in Travancore-Cochin had also attempted restrictive legislation on private schools, although in a milder form, in 1950. The Education Bill got the assent of the President and was referred to the Supreme Court, which subsequently accepted most of its provisions. But the Federal

Government dismissed the Communist ministry on the charge of ‘breakdown of law and order’ in 1959 and Mundasseri’s revolutionary legislation ended up in the dustbin. Although subsequent governments implemented some of the provisions of the bill, its core objectives were quietly buried. Though the salaries of teachers in aided private schools are today paid by the Government, school managements still have the major say in the appointment of teachers, the government nominee and the subject expert in the selection panels often being reduced to mere rubber stamps. Teaching posts are ‘auctioned’ and sold to the highest bidder. Grapevine has it that the asking rate for a secondary school teacher’s post today is well over Thirty Lakh Rupees. There is no business like education – and there are virtually no risks.

Meanwhile, the basic rights of teachers as government employees have been steadily eroded. The old regulations on ‘protection’ have been much watered down. A fall in students’ strength in government and government-aided schools would invariably mean the axe for many junior teachers. The provisions for the appointment of teachers of ‘second languages’ like Arabic and Sanskrit on part-time basis have institutionalized ‘second class citizenship’ among school teachers. Administrative ‘reforms’ like the replacement of statutory pension by contributory pension are turning teachers’ dreams of an idyllic, blissful retired life, playing with grandchildren under the mango tree, the staple of popular Malayalam fiction and cinema, into nightmares. Shakespeare might have well said that ‘security is the mortal’s chiefest enemy.’ But a sudden plunge from the certainties of a welfare state into the uncertainties of a global capitalist order can be traumatic for teachers. The proliferation of ‘un-aided’ (private) schools with English as the medium of instruction, most of which follow the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) curriculum, has, meanwhile eaten into the state’s public education system.

While no serious educationist can take the middle class paranoia about politicization of education at face value (it was Gandhi who first asked students in the country to boycott schools and colleges as part of the struggle for Independence), it is obvious that students’ politics in schools has done more harm than good in the state in the last half a century. While admitting that students’ politics can play decisive roles in a nation’s history (the students’ revolt in France in the spring of 1968 comes to mind), one wonders what adolescents who often become pawns in the hands of local politicians can hope to accomplish. The same can perhaps be said about teachers’ politics. This is not to gloss over the fact that the struggle of teachers

for dignity and better service conditions and the right to organize themselves in the middle of the Twentieth Century went hand in hand with anti-colonial struggles. “We teach to serve the nation” was one of the slogans of the teachers’ movement in Kerala in the Forties and the Fifties of the last century. But there is no gainsaying the fact that sectarian attitudes have discredited teachers’ organizations in recent times.

Akbar’s teachers’ stories (some of them are better described as ‘sketches’ or ‘anecdotes’) are unique in the sense that they have been collected in two exclusive volumes, the first time such collections have appeared in Malayalam fiction. Not that there have not been memorable stories about teachers in the language before. Not less than half a dozen stories by the first generation pioneers of Malayalam fiction about teachers have become classics. These include Karoor’s “Pothichoru” and Vaikom Muhammed Basheer’s “Pisachu” (Devil) in which a highly respected village school teacher rapes a teenaged maid. As the two stories illustrate, teachers have appeared both as victims and cohorts of a moribund social system. In Akbar’s stories, for the first time in Malayalam fiction, a golden age of glorious teaching traditions, represented by idealistic mentors like Kunhiraman Mash, the protagonist of the story “Missing in Action”, is constructed. Cynics would demolish this construction like a sand castle pointing out that construction only serves to reinforce the popular counterpoised image of the irresponsible, inefficient teacher on the one hand and to obscure the ground reality of a considerable number of unsung teachers, sans the halo of their predecessors, engaged in a slow and steady process of transformation of teaching practices. That the recent attempts by policy makers to introduce social constructivism and critical pedagogy into the curricula have had only limited success is, of course, a matter of concern. But idealism and nostalgia apart, these stories are ‘school lore’, faithful documents of school life in God’s Own Country. Coming straight from the ‘horse’s mouth’ (Akbar was a school teacher who saw it all), most of them are also, perhaps, fictionalized memoirs.

Portrait of an Alumnus as a Young Woman

The crowd at the cinema was unusually large. There was too much of jostling and shouting. When did Bharat Gopi become so popular, I wondered. Not the ghost of a chance of getting a ticket. I was turning to go home, when a female voice in the queue for the balcony class called me.

“Mohan Sir”!

Startled, I stared at the woman who beamed at me. The face seemed familiar, but I ransacked my memory unsuccessfully.

“Don’t you remember me, sir? I am Rasheeda. You taught me in the Tenth”.

I recognized her in a flash. I could not be blamed for not recognizing her at first sight. She did not look the bright, sprightly girl I knew in school. How quickly girls grow out of their teens!

“Well, you look a lot different”.

“But you look much the same, sir. Except that your hairline has retreated a bit more.”

Rasheeda smiled with the same old cheerfulness.

“I saw you turning to go, disappointed. Wait a sec. I’ll get you a ticket. India is great. We women have certain privileges over men in this country.”

Rasheeda brushed back the locks of hair that had slipped down her forehead, waved away the money for the ticket I had hurriedly extracted out of my wallet and walked towards the queue for women, a trickle compared to the men’s. I watched her fascinated. The same brisk, attractive walk.

As I waited for Rasheeda, watching the glossy posters on the wall, my mind travelled back in time. I thought of the old gag – the teacher in the first class in his career is no different from the bridegroom on his first night. Applied to me, the description had fitted to a dot. If any of my colleagues had seen me on that day, I would even have been compared to King Dushanta fidgeting before Shakunthala in Sage Kanva’s hermitage!

A class of twenty boys and about as many girls - and a slightly overgrown boy in the shape of a teacher!

After the formal introduction, I threw a question at the class – how many letters does the Malayalam alphabet have?

Although they all knew the number of letters in the English alphabet, they were on shaky grounds when it came to the Malayalam alphabet. There were four answers: fifty, fifty one, fifty two, fifty three. None of them took the risk of naming the letters.

That was when Rasheeda stunned everybody in the class by saying that all the four answers were acceptable. What is more, she gave a perfectly acceptable, logical explanation for her answer. Here was God's plenty: the most beautiful girl in class turning out to be the brightest. She was spot on with her answers to several other questions too.

It did not take long for me to realize that Rasheeda was also one of the most mischievous students in the class. When I was discussing the extract from C V Raman Pillai's *Marthandavarma* in which the heroine Parukkutty's mother regrets that Parukkutty was already sixteen years old and still unmarried, I heard Rasheeda thinking aloud: "Sixteen is a bit too early".

Not the one to let grass grow under my feet, I retorted: "Not a day too early for some girls".

There were moments when Rasheeda made me uncomfortable in the class. She had a habit of closely following not only my words but also my gestures. When I raised my hands her brows would go up automatically. One day she unnerved me with her critical thinking too. I was sitting in the staff room. Earlier in the day, I had discussed a lesson on Bheeshma's oath in the *Mahabharatha* in the class. Suddenly Rasheeda and a friend of hers materialized out of nowhere. Before I knew what was happening Rasheeda threw the question at me: "Sir, do you think Shantanu was a role model for kings? Running after Sathyavathi when his subjects were still mourning Ganga's death"!

It was too precocious a question and I could manage only some feeble, mumbled response to it. But Rasheeda was not through yet. As she walked to the door with her friend, she suddenly came back and said: "How I wish I were a king!"

"Why?"

"Because you can marry left and right!"

Stunned, I managed another feeble comeback: "Do you think matrimony is such a blissful state?"

Rasheeda laughed and stormed out of the room with her friend.

At the Schools' Arts Festival, Rasheeda was dressed up as the bride in our *oppana* troupe. Looking at her sitting in the dressing room resplendent in her costume I could not help making a comment.

"You look a real bride."

Rasheeda's response was quick. "Do I? Well, why don't you marry me right away."

Alarmed, I looked at the female teachers who were hanging around the dressing room. If they had heard Rasheeda's remark, it would be the leading story in the staff room the next day. They hadn't.

"Scared you!" Rasheeda laughed.

"Who do you think I am, your teacher or your boyfriend?"

I would have expanded on the theme. But one of my colleagues came into the dressing room precisely at that moment and I broke off.

Rasheeda gave me quite a few uneasy moments in class. She had a habit of giggling and whispering to the girl sitting next to her. Though it happened quite frequently I could not bring myself to crack down on her. But things came to a head when I ticked off one of the boys for talking in class.

"Why do you pick on me, sir?" the boy demanded indignantly. "Rasheeda does it all the time and you say nothing."

"Well, if you want to know, your score in my paper is eight. Hers is eighty."

Although it was a good snub, I could not help feeling it was rather unwarranted. Then something quite unexpected happened. Rasheeda got up from her seat and glared at the boy.

"It's no use frothing in the mouth. We girls have certain concessions."

I blew the top. That was too much – even from a bright student.

"Shut up!" I roared. A terrified hush fell over the class.

'Concession' then, 'privilege' now, I thought with a smile.

After the incident, Rasheeda put on a sullen face in the class for a few days, carefully avoiding my gaze. I chose to ignore her. Rasheeda then discovered a novel way to score me off. I was startled by a hum that rose steadily from one of the back benches, cutting into the monotony of my voice. I knew it was Rasheeda. But I could not pin it on her, for she sat with a straight face. If I went to the back of the class to investigate, the humming would stop.

Finally, exasperated, I said to the class in general: “Look, I know who is doing it. But if it doesn’t stop now, whoever is doing it will not sit in my class for the rest of the year.”

The humming stopped.

As I walked to the staff room after the class, I was arrested by a voice calling me from behind. “Sir!”

It was Rasheeda! I looked uneasily at her, not knowing what to expect.

“Sir, I was terribly upset when you ticked me off last week. But I can’t go on being cross with you. I only hummed today. I’ll hoot if I am in the mood for it.”

I was properly floored. You know when you are beaten. I stood tongue-tied as she walked off.

But the incident served to break down the hostility between us. Soon we became good friends. Not long after that, when I had just begun the lesson on the raw deal Shakunthala got at the hands of Dushanta, Rasheeda suddenly stopped coming to school. I learned she was getting married. I missed her terribly.

“Enough of daydreaming!” Rasheeda’s voice shook me out of my reveries.

We ascended the stairs to the balcony.

“What is your husband doing?”

“Oh, he has his business in Dubai.”

“Any addition to the family?”

“You mean kids? Not when he is there and I am here. We live together for less than a month in a year. He is too busy making his fast bucks. Never dreamed of taking me to Dubai. So there you are.”

The music had begun. I saw the ‘welcome’ slide on the screen through the open door. Rasheeda extended the only ticket in her hand to me.

I stared at her puzzled.

“You don’t get more than one ticket in the queue”, Rasheeda beamed at me.

That was not fair. Taking all the trouble to get me a ticket and going home without seeing the film.

“It’s all right, sir”, Rasheeda said reading my expression. “Don’t try to talk me into keeping the ticket.”

I stared at her, speechless.

“Women are a privileged category, but only on paper. But I am boring you with my philosophy. Bye, sir, see you some time.”

Rasheeda laughed that tinkling laugh of hers and disappeared down the stairs.

The Case of the Anonymous Love Letter

Why narrate such a trivial incident, you may ask. But wait a minute. Consider the facts of the case: the anonymous love-letter was found in one of Aminakkutty's notebooks; Aminakkutty was a student of Tenth-B; The discovery was made by Kunhalikkutty Mash, who also happened to be Aminakkutty's father. So, you see, it was anything but trivial. Kunhalikkutty Mash appeared in the staff room with his hands full, dragging Aminakkutty by one and holding the letter up with the other.

"*Mashe*", he turned to Pradeepan Mash who was the class teacher for Tenth-B with a pathetic expression on his face after hurriedly pushing Aminakkutty out of earshot. "I tried my best, but she wouldn't tell me who wrote it. I can't probe her anymore. Perhaps you can get it out of her."

Kunhalikkutty Mash had not finished, when a horde of teachers, male and female, gathered in a circle around them. Some of them knew that Pradeepan could solve cases like this with his eyes shut. As the case involved a colleague's daughter the risks were minimal, they knew.

Aminakkutty, my sweetie, I flinch before the arrows of cupid that dart from your eyes . . .

Pradeepan read the letter aloud and glanced meaningfully at Devaki Teacher. Devaki Teacher gifted him a smile which sent a thrill through him.

The entire staff room appeared to be reeling under Cupid's arrows. If the letter had originated in Tenth-B, it needed no extraordinary deductive skills to figure out the author was Moosakkoya. But Moosakkoya was a tricky customer – you had to handle him with kid gloves. It needed only a sign from that young gentleman to bring the school to a grinding halt. It was not unusual for the headmistress to consult him in the afternoon to get his opinion on whether it was all right to run the classes as usual the next day.

Just a few days back a missive of love launched at Komalam, an upcoming siren who played hopscotch with her eyes, had missed its target and landed at Kunhalikkutty Mash's feet. It was a delicate situation in which indifference would have called his authority into question. As he started reading the horribly spelt quotation from a currently popular film song, it did not take him long to realize that Moosakkoya was the author, and to transform the stern expression on his face to one of mild amusement. Unlike Moosakkoya, he had no desire to crush

Komalam in his arms, as the song suggested (such a crushing embrace had recently cost a young teacher his job).

Theoretically, Kunhalikkutty Mash had no objection to Moosakkoya going in for crushing embraces. But not when the object of his desire was his own daughter. In any case, dealing a crushing blow to Moosakkoya's ambitions was easier said than done. And to think Cupid's arrows had already started raining on him!

Taking the problem to the Headmistress was an exercise in futility. She never acted without consulting the related GO on the issue. Take what happened last year. When Karunakaran of Tenth-G shocked her with his declaration of love she consulted the KER. Not finding anything relating specifically to a situation in which a student said "I love you, darling" to a headmistress in the manual, she initiated a correspondence with the officials in the Department of Education on the issue which was still to be concluded. Meanwhile Mr. Karunakaran failed in the Board Examination and joined a local coaching centre.

Everybody wondered how Pradeepan would handle the Aminakkutty case. Would it be too optimistic to hope for a string of holidays on account of a students' strike over it?

"No lover has ever flinched from Cupid's arrows. I would call it a hyperbole."

That was from Kelu Mash, the Malayalam teacher. Kelu Nambiar had joined the school on protection last year and had immediately become famous for his presence of mind. When some students sprayed ink on the front of his shirt, he had, following Jesus Christ's suggestion, nonchalantly shown them the back of his shirt for more spraying.

It was clear from Kunhalikkutty Mash's expression that he did not think much of Kelu Mash's wisecrack. Who did the fellow think he was, arriving here like a moth after a rain, getting kicked out of the school where he worked? This was certainly not the time for his stupid gags.

"Do you know what McDonald Crichtley says about teachers in his book *Divine Banquet of the Brain*?" Jayapalan suddenly asked Kelu Mash.

"No."

"He says teachers are the most difficult people to deal with."

“I am sure he would have come up with a host of discoveries – that we lack discipline, that we are never sure of ourselves etc, etc”, Ramakrishnan Mash intervened.

“I would like to read the book. But, I don’t know if I will understand it”, Kelu Mash glanced doubtfully at Jayapalan.

“Fat chance! Whoever heard of Malayalam teachers reading English?”

“Blabbering idiots!”, Kunhalikkutty Mash was furious. Here he was, trying his best to fend off Cupid’s arrows, when his colleagues were talking pure tripe!

The bell rang to mark the end of the period.

“KK¹, careful how you handle it”, Kelu Mash tried soothing ruffled feathers. “You’ve to think of Aminakkutty. Leave it to Pradeepan. He will find a way out.”

That was fair, Kunhalikkutty Mash thought.

Meanwhile Aminakkutty wondered: None of the teachers are as ‘accomplished’ as Pradeepan Sir. Perhaps he would tell me who I should blame it on.

¹ The common practice of addressing teachers by their initials.

Missing in Action

Where on earth was Kunhiraman Mash? The Headmistress looked at her watch impatiently. The A List for the SSLC Exams had to be posted in the morning. If it missed the morning's post, it would have to be sent by a special messenger.

Kunhiraman Mash had promised to get the list ready and bring it by Nine in the morning. There was nobody like Kunhiraman Mash for doing things meticulously and punctually. Somebody could have reminded him of it after the classes yesterday. But then, Kunhiraman Mash was not the man to forget anything he was entrusted with.

The Headmistress was about to send Raman the school peon to Kunhiraman Mash's home to get the A List when Mash's son Divakaran appeared with a startling bit of news - Mash had not gone home yesterday. Divakaran was under the impression that the Headmistress had sent him on some official work. The Headmistress shook her head. She had only seen him leave the school after the classes yesterday.

Divakaran was almost in tears. What on earth had happened to Kunhiraman Mash? How could the school send the A List in time? The Headmistress was in a quandary.

In the staff room, none of us teachers had the ghost of an idea about what had happened. We - half a dozen teachers including me who usually came to school a little early - were busy discussing ways of getting out of the invigilation duty for the exams - a troublesome, risky business - and getting in for the centralized evaluation. The remuneration for centralized evaluation was reasonably good. Greasing the palms of Ramakrishnan the section clerk at the DEO's office might take care of the first, but the second involved pulling other strings. That was when the Headmistress came rushing in and shook us out of our little conspiracies.

What really worried us was the fact that Kunhiraman Mash socialized only with his colleagues. Home to school in the morning, school to home in the evening - that had been Kunhiraman Mash's routine from as long back as anybody could remember.

"Does he usually go anywhere without telling you?", I asked Divakaran.

“Sometimes he goes to my sister’s. But not without telling us. And he never forgets to take his tablets.”

That was disconcerting. Kunhiraman Mash had high blood pressure. He virtually survived on the tablets. Divakaran had looked in at his sister’s home and found his father had not been there.

We sent Divakaran home, assuring him we would do everything in our power to find Kunhiraman Mash. But we were as worried as him over Kunhiraman Mash’s whereabouts. Raman suddenly remembered that he had seen Kunhiraman Mash and Anandan Mash together on the road in the evening yesterday after the classes. Balakrishnan Nair the First Assistant found Ananthan Mash flirting with Jameela Teacher in the women’s section of the staff room – his favourite pastime. He hadn’t learned of Kunhiraman Mash’s disappearance. Balakrishnan Mash was annoyed – him and his silly dawdling.

Breaking off his discussion with Jameela Teacher on disco saris, Ananthan Mash, a trifle annoyed at the intervention, looked inquiringly at Balakrishnan Mash. But Kunhiraman Mash’s disappearance upset him too. He had met Kunhiraman Mash at the bus stop after Jameela Teacher had left in her bus. They had then walked together up to the next junction on the road. Ananthan did not remember anything particularly remarkable that Kunhiraman Mash had said to him. Neither had he noticed anything strange in Kunhiraman Mash’s behavior. They had walked the whole distance almost in silence, as they often did.

The staff room was plunged into a gloomy silence.

Kunhiraman Mash was a staunch Gandhian. He believed Gandhian ideals had an important role in education. Which was why he found it difficult to put up with the state of affairs in the school.

“Students have no interest in studies. Even when they show some interest, teachers are too indifferent to help them.”

Once he had confided an experience of his to me.

“I was on substitution in Ninth D. It’s not one of my regular classes. I had a taste of the effects of the all-promotion business. None of them can write a sentence in English correctly. When I suggested I could help them with their grammar and usage, one of them suddenly stood up and said he and his classmates would be happier playing in the grounds. I could chat with my colleagues in the staff room, he added. What a perfect arrangement! All the time some students

from other divisions were coming into the classroom to borrow textbooks. None of them as much as acknowledged my presence. What a plight!”

Kunhiraman Mash’s zeal for teaching often made him a caricature to his students. He had a dramatic style of presentation. Once when he was teaching history, he quoted Louis Fourteenth’s notorious statement “I am the State”, acting the part perfectly. There was a chorus of booing from the class. Kunhiraman Mash was mildly surprised. Had his students become as politically conscious as to react spontaneously to declarations of authoritarian dispensations? As he pondered over it, a girl in one of the front rows stood up and said: Sir, there is chalk powder on Louis Fourteenth’s cheeks!

It was during a students’ strike that Kunhiraman Mash created history. Students’ strikes were traumatic experiences for us. Sometimes our students would hold us captive in the staff room for long hours. The students’ leaders had no scruples about using filthy language on us either. The more resourceful among us could smell a strike well in advance, stay away from the school on strike days and attend to other business. But on that fateful day Kunhiraman Mash did the unthinkable: he conducted a special class! Half way through the class the strikers arrived and told Kunhiraman Mash they would have none of it. But Kunhiraman Mash said he would let off the class only if the students sitting in the class asked him to.

“We are not looking for support from blacklegs”, the leaders hissed. But the attempts to cow down the ten students who had dared to attend the special class failed. The leaders then decided to go for the last resort – occupying the classroom and dragging out the blacklegs.

But before that happened Kunhiraman Mash swung into action. He spread his cowl on the floor at the door and stretched himself on it. “Over my dead body”, he said sternly. There was an impasse. When the news reached the staff room some of the teachers who were playing cards rushed to the scene.

“Come on sir”, they pleaded to Kunhiraman Mash, “boys will be boys. Let’s not create an ugly scene.”

The students’ leaders were getting restive. Nobody would be surprised if they laid their hands on Kunhiraman Mash. The scene ended with Kunhiraman Mash being virtually carried to the staff room by half a dozen of his colleagues.

There was a repeat performance of the same scene when we teachers went on strike.

That was Kunhiraman Mash – a man of principles who stuck to the straight and narrow path. We just could not understand him.

As we stood wondering where to look for Kunhiraman Mash, somebody reminded the Headmistress it was time for the first bell.

“But shouldn’t we let off the classes as Kunhiraman Mash is missing?”, Kumaran Mash inquired, less as a suggestion than a gamble. His idea was to slink away quietly to the staff room as the search for Kunhiraman Mash began and to resume his game of cards. The Headmistress glared at him.

A group of students had collected on the verandah. Normally I would not go a mile near such gatherings. It was not pleasant to hear your nickname bandied about irreverently by your students. But this bunch were in the class I was in charge of. The Headmistress would collar me if they made a ruckus.

“Mate, heard the latest? Our Kunhiraman has gone missing”, I heard one of the students saying to another.

“Kunhiraman? You mean *Thoppi* Kunhiraman?”

Kunhiraman Mash was known among the students by the nickname *Thoppi*(Cap). Some time ago he used to come to school wearing a Gandhi cap.

“Who else?”

“Makes me wonder. After what happened in the class yesterday . . . “

I pricked up my ears. I had seen Kunhiraman Mash teaching in Tenth-G as I left the school yesterday evening. There had been a sudden downpour and classes were let off before time. What had happened in Tenth –G? A couple of students took a step towards me, as if they wanted to tell me something. But I thought better of entertaining them. I made them get into the class with an ingratiating smile, telling them I would be back in an instant. It was better to ask Venu, the only serious student in the class, about what happened yesterday, I decided.

The Headmistress had already formed a two-man task force comprising Balakrishnan Nair and Ananthan Mash to search for Kunhiraman Mash. Ananthan Mash was a ladies’ man, but he was quite efficient when efficiency was called for. The Headmistress’ face brightened a little when she saw me.

“Ah, Vinodan, you can join them too.”

As the three of us set out, the Headmistress suddenly stopped us. “Something really bad happened in Tenth-G yesterday afternoon. I was wondering if I should tell you about it.”

The Headmistress hesitated. “Take a look at this.” She extended a piece of paper to me.

I read the badly spelt lyrics of the song from a recent film.

Laying you down, darling

On a bed of roses,

Take off your glittering jewels ...

Oh, no, I won't tell you the rest.

“This is a song from a B grade movie.”

“It might be. But it also served as Suresh's love-letter to Thankam. “

Suresh was a notified villain, the leading light of one of the students' organizations. And you could call Thankam, who studied in the same class, a moll in the making who thought nothing of giving even teachers the eye. The Headmistress narrated the incident.

Suresh had already been in Kunhiraman Mash's bad books. In one of his class tests, Suresh wrote an off-beat answer to a question on India's contributions to world culture: “Not anything to write home about. A hundred rupees is as far as India could go.” On another occasion when Kunhiraman Mash offered to read a poem in English similar in theme to the Malayalam poem he was teaching, Suresh said in his drawling voice: “Well, if you insist. There is nothing we can do about it”. Yesterday Kunhiraman Mash caught Suresh red handed, as he passed the note to Thankam. Infuriated, Kunhiraman Mash pulled Suresh out of his seat, dragged him to the front of the class and hit him on the small of his back.

“Don't touch me, you son-of-a-bitch”! , Suresh roared, wriggling himself free.

A horrified silence fell in the classroom. Kunhiraman Mash stormed out of the classroom and went to report the incident to the Headmistress.

The students' leaders were summoned. We did nothing without consulting them.

“He must be nuts”, said Bhaskaran, the area secretary of Suresh's organization. All Bhaskaran knew about the contents of his textbooks could be written on a postage stamp. But his general knowledge was immense. “In this age! You've only got to open the day's papers to know what is happening all around you – Padmini Kolhapuri kissing Prince Charles at the airport, the sexcapades of Ramrao Adik. And you can't really blame them. What did Gandhiji do? Slipped into bed naked with a young girl! As for calling him 'son-

of-a-bitch', I don't know about his mother, but being Narayana Kurup's son, the epithet fits him to the dot."

Rajan, the secretary of the rival organization could not go along with him. "What Suresh did amounts to gross misbehaviour. He must be punished for it."

"Shut up!" Bhaskaran barked at him.

Kunhiraman Mash had had enough. "I withdraw my complaint", he told the headmistress and walked out in a huff.

A numbness seized us as the Headmistress narrated the incident. Balakrishnan Nair shuffled his feet. "This is the limit. We have to do something."

"I've given instructions that Suresh should not be admitted to the class till the teachers and the students' council meet."

The Headmistress added that several students, including some who were members of Suresh's organization, had requested her to take disciplinary action against Suresh.

"I don't think the leaders of any responsible students' organization would tolerate its members doing such things in the classroom", Balakrishnan Nair spoke with conviction. "It's the handiwork of certain semi-illiterate local politicians who want to fish in troubled waters. But they should know that we teachers too have organizations."

It took us a few moments to come back to the issue at hand. We had to find Kunhiraman Mash.

"Madam, please inform all teachers about it. Suresh cannot continue in this school. We cannot let grass grow under our feet, whatever the consequences."

As we left, we heard the Headmistress saying to herself: O, God, what shall I do for the A List. To hell with her A List!

As we walked down the verandah, I caught Ananthan exchanging a series of gestures with Jameela Teacher who was engaging one of the classes. From the sign for eating Ananthan made, I guessed he was telling her they could meet at lunch. Ananthan lived within a stone-throw's distance from the school. But to savour Jameela Teacher's company during the recess he developed the habit of bringing his lunch to school.

"Sir."

It was Raman. The Headmistress had asked him to get the keys of the East Block from Balakrishnan Nair. The East Block consisted of classrooms which

were abandoned like a military outpost after a war when the student strength fell drastically as the Government generously allowed a number of new schools to come up in the neighbouring villages.

“Somebody borrowed them from me to take out benches and desks from one of the rooms yesterday. I don’t remember who, but I haven’t got them back.”

“I think she has an idea that KunhIRaman Mash is hiding there”, Raman said innocently.

Balakrishnan Mash glared at him.

We had not gone far when we saw Velayudhan Mash approaching. Velayudhan Mash was well connected with the ruling party. He would be on ‘French leave’ most of the days. It was always a pleasant surprise to see him coming to school. Today was such a blue moon day. We heaved sighs of relief. Velayudhan Mash was a man who exuded confidence.

Velayudhan Mash had had a brief encounter with KunhIRaman Mash some time ago. A new DEO, a young upstart, had taken charge. His favourite pastime was to give unsuspecting teachers the works. He had no qualms about insulting them before their students. When the DEO came on inspection to the school Velayudhan Mash was, as usual, found missing. When Velayudhan Mash learned of the visit the next day, he merely shrugged his shoulders.

“What can the bugger do? Suspend me? Poor fish! I can get him dismissed if I get the urge.”

KunhIRaman Mash overheard the remark.

“I know you’ll say the same about any DEO. No wonder they say teachers should stay away from politics.”

Velayudhan Mash was not offended. He smiled politely at KunhIRaman Mash. Nobody would be offended at anything KunhIRaman Mash ever said – he never meant to hurt anybody.

Velayudhan Mash too was shocked to hear about KunhIRaman Mash’s disappearance. He joined us on the way to KunhIRaman Mash’s house. We had decided to meet Mash’s wife before we decided where to look for him.

We had not gone far before we saw Soman come running towards us. Soman was a devil in human shape when drunk, but a bleating lamb when sober. He was quite sober now.

“Is KunhIRaman Mash missing?” Soman asked me.

When I nodded in the affirmative something extraordinary happened – Soman broke into a sob!

“Forgive me, I did something terrible.”

Between sobs, Soman narrated the incident. Soman had ran into KunhIRaman Mash yesterday evening on the road. Immediately, as was his habit, Soman tried to touch KunhIRaman Mash for two rupees. But KunhIRaman Mash, knowing very well what he wanted the money for, refused to oblige. This sent Soman into a paroxysm of fury.

“You Gandhians are the limit! Gandhi’s son soaked himself in the stuff. The old man couldn’t stop him. And you think you can reform me! This is what your teaching did to me. I am a worthless tramp. I can’t even do simple arithmetic. What is two rupees to you? You get a load of it without doing any work!”

KunhIRaman Mash had walked away without bothering to reply to Soman’s tirade.

Soman was crying like a child now. It took us quite an effort to convince Soman that KunhIRaman Mash was not the one to harbour a grudge against anybody. But Soman also had to let bygones be bygones.

All our enquiries turned exercises in futility. There was only one option left – to inform the police. Unfortunately Velayudhan Mash did not know the sub inspector who had taken charge only recently personally. But that was not half the problem. Political influence apart, you could not get anything done by a police officer without greasing his palms.

“We have our Association fund to dig into”, I assured Ananthan Mash who was worried about the money angle.

“Come on, chums”, Velayudhan Mash said cheerfully. The DSP was camping in the PWD Rest House on an investigation. Velayudhan Mash knew him personally.

At the Rest House the DSP assured us he would do everything in his power to trace KunhIRaman Mash.

It was almost nightfall when we reached the school. The Headmistress had told us she would wait for us, however late we were. But there was nobody at the school. The Headmistress and the teachers who had stayed back with her would probably have left after a long wait.

Suddenly, in the eerie silence of the moonlit night we thought we heard a noise. It came from the East Block across the grounds. As we strained our ears, we thought it sounded like an undulating voice – and somehow familiar. We rushed towards the East Block. Pushing open the door of the room from which the voice came Ananthan Mash switched on the lights.

Kunhiraman Mash was busy teaching a bunch of empty benches and desks. He hardly noticed our intrusion.

Birds in a Gilded Cage

“Shall we go for a satire, then? You know, that is exactly what Mathew Mash suggested.”

Mathew, the housemaster was not around. So Vishwanathan was turning to me for guidance. But my eyes were riveted on Velappan Mash who, sitting on the chair next to the door, was keeping me and Pankajakshi Teacher under close observation – as if he expected me to make a pass at her any moment. Not that we had ever scrawled messages of love in the air with our eyes, as the song goes. But Velappan had put two and two together and figured out she had a crush for me – Velappan, the proverbial dark horse, the mute, inglorious Casanova.

Was Velappan really jealous of me? The poor fish! Little did he know that I had no clue as to what Pankajakshi really had in her mind.

“But the problem with satires is that no satire has ever won a prize in a competition. What everybody wants is some stuff nobody can make head or tail of. . .”, Viswanathan rambled on, without realizing that my mind was elsewhere.

“Look KKV”, Habeeb Mash intervened, “just because you are too hare-brained to understand contemporary drama, don’t rush to the conclusion it will always go over our heads. As for satires, sometimes they can be more effective than the so-called ‘serious plays.’

Meanwhile Rameshan Mash, the master raconteur was narrating his anecdote about the country bumpkin and the bus conductor. As the anecdote ended, Rameshan Mash glanced slyly at Pankajakshi Teacher. Was she flashing that charming smile of hers? Most jokes in the staff room were meant for Pankajakshi Teacher. Rameshan had tried his witticisms on Valsala Teacher and Susamma Teacher too, but without success. But Pankajakshi was a woman for all seasons. And she had her own stock of anecdotes and jokes too. The expressions on the faces of Valsala Teacher and Susamma Teacher indicated in no uncertain terms that they were not in the market for Rameshan’s witticism - nor for Pankajakshi’s flirtatious smile.

Taking his cue from Rameshan, Vishwanathan now launched on his own anecdote, featuring the same country bumpkin, successfully completed it and won the coveted smile from Pankajakshi. Most of the male teachers had recently developed the habit of throwing covert glances at Pankajakshi, even when they were correcting the students’ assignments. But Vishwanathan was a little cross-

eyed. One could not be too sure about who he was looking at. Many eager female teachers had made fools of themselves by returning smiles of Vishwanathan's directed elsewhere. But Pankajakshi was well up with the configuration of Vishwanathan's eyes as well.

It was the noon recess. Male teachers were scattered in small groups in the staff room, talking, laughing and throwing the occasional glance at Pankajakshi. It was the first day of the month – payday – and there was the usual festive air everywhere. And if you happened to forget it, there was Gopalan, who ran the school cafeteria, taking his round of the staff room with an open notebook in his hand, the book of accounts to remind you.

"Gopalan, I don't think you should charge fancy prices for fried fish in your joint", Anthru Mash was heard telling Gopalan. Anthru Mash never kept accounts with Gopalan, preferring to pay on the spot for whatever he ate or drank at the cafeteria.

"I never charge fancy prices, sir. The fish comes from Thalasseri. You know what it costs there."

Like everybody else, Gopalan ended his protestation with a glance at Pankajakshi – and was promptly rewarded with a smile.

There was the rumple of a vehicle parking in the school grounds. There was sudden consternation in the staff room. All eyes searched for Sundareshan the staff secretary. Most visitors on pay day came for donations for a variety of causes. As our declared policy was that all donations were to be routed through the staff secretary, the trick was to send Sundareshan into hiding and tell the visitors he was on leave.

But this time the visitors only had an innocuous purpose. "They have come to meet Rajan Mash", Sundareshan, who seemed to have materialized from thin air, reassured us. Rajan Mash was a local bigwig of the ruling party.

What happened to the Tamil hucksters, Kelappan Mash wondered aloud. He meant the Tamil salesmen who came to sell saris on every payday. There would be peddlers of other ware too: seedlings of plants and fruit trees, books on pre-publication schemes. The sari hucksters never made a killing; most of us just liked to look at the saris. But Kelappan Mash was a regular buyer. Although his wife was on the wrong side of fifty, it appeared he still doted over her. The women teachers rarely bought saris from the Tamils, but if any of their male colleagues wanted to buy them for their wives they invariably made the selection.

Pankajakshi, it turned out, was the most accomplished bargainer. Nobody could beat Panky at the game. Recently she had made history by bringing down the price of a sari from the Tamil peddler's tall claim of one hundred and fifty rupees to a paltry twenty five.

"You haven't paid your subscription for the last three months", Sundareshan said to Vishwanathan, more than a little annoyed. "I am quitting. You can ask some other nut to be the staff secretary.

"Two, not three", Vishwanathan corrected Sundareshan. Sundareshan was furious. He knew exactly how much Vishwanathan owed.

"Come on, pay up, you cheapskate", Kelappan Mash taunted Vishwanathan.

Vishwanathan was not bothered about what Sundareshan or Kelappan thought about him. But he looked alarmingly around to assure himself that the women teachers, Panky in particular, had not overheard the conversation.

"Hundred and fifty – first call" – that was Ashokan Mash from the stores, adjoining the staff room, taking bids for the month's draw in the chit funds Raghu Mash ran. Raghu Mash started the chit when he needed money for his marriage. It was not the first time he was short of money. He used to take loans regularly from Anthru Mash. Anthru Mash's monthly rate of interest was usually five percent. But he generously reduced it to three percent for his colleagues. Raghu had squared his accounts with Anthru Mash with the amount he got from the first draw of the chit funds.

I had got the draw last month. Pankajakshi had immediately borrowed the whole amount from me. But that was strictly between us. Not a soul knew where the money went. She was having a house built. The housing loan was on its way. She needed some money to get by till then. I couldn't say no. But the repayment was already overdue.

Around another table across the room there was rejoicing over the approval for the payment of another four installments of dearness allowance for government employees and teachers.

"Don't quote me", Raju Mash, the Arts and Crafts teacher, put in, "but, I often get the feeling that we are being paid a gigantic sum for not doing any work at all."

“Right from the horse’s mouth!” Anthru Mash shot back. “Vishwanathan here would like to be born as an Arts and Crafts teacher if he has another life to live.”

“Don’t call all teachers shirkers. Of course, there are some bad eggs. But don’t think the whole lot is rotten.”

That was Pankajakshi’s rejoinder.

“Oh, no, don’t get worked up”, Anthru Mash smiled. “I was really doing some loud thinking about myself.”

In the ripple of laughter that followed I noticed Panky glancing in my direction. But still under eagle-eyed Velappan’s spell. I could not make a move.

Ashokan came into the staff room after disposing of the month’s chit funds draw. His next task was to conduct the payday thambola, a version of bingo in which half the players won and were treated to paranthas and chicken at the local restaurant by the other half. For his role as the organizer Ashokan got his paranthas and chicken free every time. As the players gathered around him, Ashokan looked hopefully at Pankajakshi. He knew Panky’s participation would draw in a swarm of male teachers. The women generally stayed away from the game.

But Pankajakshi disappointed him. “Leave me out, Mashe. Of course, I don’t mind buying you tea on my own.”

She flashed her charming smile. Ashokan was crestfallen.

Before she came to our school, Pankajakshi worked in an aided school where she became surplus due to a fall in students’ enrollment. Somasekharan Nair – “my poor, frail, goner of a husband” – who also worked in the same school sprang to action before any aided school ‘absorbed’ her, bribed the section clerk at the District Director’s office and got her appointed in our government school.

The news that reached us was that a certain Pankajakshi Amma was joining the school. The ‘Amma’ tagged on to the name gave us visions of some jaded, corpulent hag. But the new recruit turned out to be a stunner – and too wily for most people’s liking. Soon she replaced Rathi (from whom all the male teachers, except her husband Kunhanandan, who was also a colleague of ours, kept a respectable distance) as the staff room beauty.

I was the first colleague in the school with whom Pankajakshi struck up an acquaintance. We travelled in the same bus the day she came to join the school. I was coming back from a trip to town to buy some sports equipment for the school.

Pankajakshi was delighted when she learned I worked in the same school. I had a taste of her nimble wit on that first meeting. She was amused by the way we Mallus had tampered with the English words ‘teacher’ and ‘master’. The former now applied exclusively to women and the latter, often compressed to ‘Mash’, to men.

“There are some women ‘masters’ too”, I added. “Vishwanathan’s wife is a postmaster. There is no ‘postmistress’ in the Department of Post’s vocabulary yet.”

Pankajakshi laughed.

At the school I promptly introduced Pankajakshi to the Headmaster and my other colleagues.

Less than a week after joining the school Pankajakshi ran into trouble – or so it appeared.

It was Prabhavathi who started it when she discovered the glaring disparity in workload between Pankajakshi and her. She promptly marched to First Assistant Velu Nair and demanded why she was given twenty one periods to teach while Pankajakshi got only eighteen. She was a senior teacher, Prabhavathi reminded Velu Nair, and a PSC recruit, unlike Pankajakshi who had come on protection. To be honest, it was a case of clean jealousy. Who wouldn’t envy Panky’s conquest of hearts in the staff room?

The news soon reached Pankajakshi through the grapevine – through Sukumaran, the school peon to be precise – and she struck back.

“To hell with her PSC! Trust some busybody to trash teachers who really work. I was selected by the PSC too. I was just not interested in joining some god-forsaken school. She may be senior to me here, but somebody ought to remind her I have been in this business longer than her.”

This was said to Sukumaran, but in a voice loud enough for everybody in the staff room to hear.

That was the last time Prabhavathi, or anybody else for that matter, invoked protection to stigmatize Pankajakshi.

But Pankajakshi’s greatest triumph was in putting Velappan Mash in his place. We knew Velappan was trying desperately to become more intimate with Panky. But it was his weakness for poetry that proved to be his undoing. He made Neruda turn in his grave by writing “I want to do with you what the spring does with the cherry trees” on a piece of paper and slipping it to Pankajakshi. But

Pankajakshi could out-Neruda Neruda if the occasion demanded. “I want to do with you what the monkey does with the cherry trees”, she wrote back.

Like many other things that happened in the staff room it soon became a big laugh for us. But, surprisingly, Velappan never came to know that we were on to it.

It took Panky very little time to conquer the staff room. Genghis Khan would have taken her correspondence course. Many teachers who had made it a habit of hanging around the library or the labs made a beeline for the staffroom after she joined the school.

I hazarded a glance in Panky’s direction and saw her putting back the paper she was reading on the table and taking up a children’s magazine. She loved children’s magazines. As I was in charge of the reading room, Panky frequently came to me to borrow children’s magazines. This made some of my male colleagues jealous of me. Most of them, who had never bought a book or magazine in their lives, or even borrowed one for reading, now vied with each other in buying children’s magazines and lending them to Panky. The tables in the staff room were now littered with children’s magazines.

The bell rang, signaling the end of a period. Most of the male teachers suddenly became apprehensive. Everyone fervently hoped that he and Panky would not have substitution. For Panky alone to get substitution was equally bad. Rajagopalan Mash, the headmaster derived a certain sadistic pleasure in giving the maximum possible substitution to Panky.

Rajagopalan Mash was an unusual character. The story of his life could have been lifted right out of Arabian Nights. At the age of Twenty Five, he married Rathnavalli Teacher, a widow ten years older than him. It so happened that Rajagopalan Mash’s father, Rairu Kurup, a robust widower at Forty contracted marriage with Hema, Rathnavalli teacher’s young daughter by her first marriage. This happened while Rajagopalan Mash was living in Burma after a row with his father. That life had been hard to Rajagopalan Mash showed in everything he said and did. He took it out of his junior colleagues too.

“Andaman for me”, Anthru Mash said as he signed the substitution register. ‘Andaman’ was the name we had given to the block at the far end of the school grounds.

It was my lucky day. Neither Panky nor I got substitution. Well, you wouldn’t call it *my* lucky day exactly. Anthru Mash was the only one who got

substitution. I wondered why Panky was spared. The substitution chart was, probably, not Rajagopalan Mash's handiwork. First Assistant Velu Nair had a soft corner for Panky.

As Panky suddenly took up a pencil from the table, some of us tensed. If she was going to solve a crossword puzzle it would invariably be an exercise in discovery of our ignorance. Habeeb Mash and Vinod Mash, walking encyclopedias who could have salvaged our pride were not around. The only thing I did not like about Panky was her habit of squeezing us to increase her word power and general knowledge.

But, personally, I had no cause for worry. Panky and I had reached an understanding on the matter. "Ask me to do anything with my body, I am game", I had once told her categorically when she tried to test my intelligence with a riddle, "but don't ransack my mind. I am only a poor physical education teacher." Panky laughed. She never bothered me with her crossword puzzles after that.

But what she said to me when we met on an evening a few days ago as I was returning from a basketball coaching session sounded to me like a riddle. "How fit you are!", Panky said gazing admiringly at me. "You have a perfect body - like Jayan's." Jayan was then the reigning superstar in Malayalam cinema.

As soon as he saw Panky taking up the crossword puzzle, Vishwanathan hurriedly went out – as if he had suddenly remembered an urgent engagement. But I knew the reason for his sudden exit. He had recently cut a poor figure answering one of Panky's straightforward puzzles – the one about the birds on the tree. Vishwanathan thought that out of the original twenty birds on the tree, nineteen would remain if one was shot. Once bitten, twice shy.

I made sure that Vishwanathan was gone before lighting a cigarette. Vishwanathan had a nasty habit of borrowing cigarettes. He even cringed for beedi butts. It was Pankajakshi who once quoted Kunjunni Mash's famous lines about the man who had to borrow fingers and lips to smoke, when she saw Vishwanathan borrow, first a beedi, and then a match to light it: "Poor Vishwanathan! Give him a pair of lips too."

"Give them to him yourself", I had whispered to her as I picked up a paper from her desk. It was too good an innuendo to pass by.

"Not for him", Pankajakshy had shot back.

Vishwanathan appeared to be chastised by the experience. The next day he appeared with a pack of Dinesh beedi and a box of matches of his own. But it was too good to last, and Vishwanathan soon drifted back to his begging ways.

Sajeevan of Tenth A, the school leader came in, followed by Ratheesh, the whiz kid with a scholarship, who was the class leader for Ninth K. Sajeevan had been sent by some annoyed teacher to fetch a cane-rod. Ratheesh had come to collect his classmates' notebooks.

"Sajeevan, we'll have our test paper on Wednesday. Tell your classmates."

"But, sir, we are going on strike from Wednesday. The call for the strike came in today's papers."

"What is the strike for", Panky demanded.

"Don't know. I just read the headline." Sajeevan then turned to me and whispered conspiratorially. "Goody-goody for you, sir. All the time in the world for your real estate business!"

"I knew about the strike", Rameshan said with a smirk. "It was to get it from the horse's mouth that I threw the test paper bait. It worked."

Rameshan was pleased as punch. His wife was in the hospital for her delivery. As he hummed a tune, he suddenly noticed that Ratheesh was still gathering the notebooks into a pile. Surely he had overheard the last remark. Rameshan bit his lip. To get over his embarrassment he hummed the tune a little louder.

More class leaders arrived to collect notebooks. Suddenly there was a stir. Everybody turned to look at the door. It was the Headmaster. He held a folded sheet of paper in his hand. He looked terribly annoyed.

"Ratheesh, come here for a minute, will you."

Ratheesh stopped picking up the notebooks and ran up to the Headmaster.

"Imagine you are writing an application for leave. You write 'please grant me leave.' How do you spell 'grant'?"

"g-r-a-n-t, sir."

"Thank you. You may go."

Ratheesh walked away with a puzzled expression on his face.

"Now", he turned to Panky, "*you* tell me how *you* spell 'grant'. He thrust the paper at Panky's face and tapped on a spot on it. Vishwanathan chose precisely that critical moment to return to the staff room.

The class leaders, including Ratheesh were now staring excitedly at the Headmaster and Panky. Panky appeared to be cowering before the Headmaster. Rameshan was furious. “Scram!”, he shouted at the boys, and they ran away.

“It’s not ‘g-r-a-n-d’, it’s ‘g-r-a-n-t.’ You could have used the printed application form. If you are so keen on writing an application on your own, see that you spell it properly.”

Without waiting for Panky’s reply, he marched out. There was dead silence in the classroom. Nobody said anything for several moments.

Habeeb Mash and Vinod Mash came in.

“What’s the matter with the HM?” , Habeeb inquired. “The way he looked, I thought something had happened here. Why was he so worked up?”

I gave him a gist of what happened.

“How did you make such a bloomer?” Vinod Mash asked Panky. He was enjoying himself thoroughly.

“Divakaran Mash wrote the application for me. I just signed it.”

Divakaran Mash taught English in the Tenth. Most of the female teachers’ applications and other correspondence were taken care of by obliging and chivalrous male teachers.

“Not something to splash over the front page of New York times”, I said in a feeble attempt to console Panky. Panky looked flustered. Who would like to be insulted so crassly before colleagues – and a bunch of students?

Rameshan and Habeeb tried to indulge in small talk to dispel the prevailing gloom. And then Panky dropped her bombshell.

“Rajagopalan Mash is his own grandfather.”

Panky’s voice rang with vengeance.

Vishwanathan, who was chuckling at Panky’s discomfiture, was the first to respond. “I admit my ignorance. But how can Rajagopalan Mash be his own grandfather?”

Panky wiped her face with a handkerchief.

“Let me enlighten you. Rajagopalan Mash married Rathnavalli teacher, a widow of thirty five years, at the age of twenty five. Rathnavalli teacher had a daughter by her first marriage named Hema, who was twenty years old then. It so happened that Rairu Kurup, Rajagopalan Mash’s father, who was forty five years old at the time, married Hema soon after. Do you get the scenario?”

We nodded. Crystal clear so far. I was wondering how Panky had collected the details so meticulously

“Now try to imagine how things would look if your father married your wife’s daughter.”

Most of us were trying to construct a picture of the extraordinary situation in our minds when Habeeb exclaimed, “Ha, that would be like your daughter becoming your mother!.”

“Exactly. Now let us go on to what happened next. Rajagopalan Mash had a son by Rathnavalli teacher who was named Bijumon”, Panky paused dramatically. “Apart from being his son, what else would Bijumon be to Rajagopalan Mash?”

We stared helplessly at Panky.

“His uncle!”, Panky said triumphantly. “Because Bijumon is also Rajagopalan Mash’s stepmother’s half brother.” The explanation was for the benefit of twits like us.

“Moreover”, Panky continued, throwing us into a labyrinth from which there was no escape, “Hema being Bijumon’s half-brother, her husband Rairu Kurup can be considered a sort of son-in-law to Rajagopalan Mash. Father and son-in-law rolled into one! Meanwhile Hema bore Rairu Kurup a son who was named Shajumon. So Shajumon becomes a half-brother to Rajagopalan Mash – besides being his step-daughter’s son. Now consider this. What else would Rathnavalli teacher be to Rajagopalan Mash besides being his wife?”

Our confusion had grown into utter bewilderment.

“His step-brother’s grandmother, which is as good as saying he could call her ‘granny’. So it follows that Rajagopalan Mash is married to his granny. Your granny’s husband is, for all practical purposes, your grandpa.” Panky paused again for effect.

“In other words, Rajagopalan Mash is his own grandfather!” Panky concluded with a laugh.

Habeeb and Vinodan laughed uproariously.

“Coming to think of it”, Vinodan said after the waves of laughter died out, “I remember reading an English poem titled ‘I am my Grandfather’. But I never thought it could work out his way.”

Vinodan laughed again as Panky flashed her bewitching smile.

Some of us asked Panky to explain the finer points of her hypothesis to get to the bottom of it. Although leg-pulling was a routine affair in the staff room, we had never heard such a nasty attack against anybody. Who could have guessed that the children's magazines Panky read were capable of producing such a creative explosion in her mind? Panky seemed to be rollicking in the neatly executed vengeance.

Suddenly I remembered that I had to engage X-B for the last period of the day. I hastened to the library to collect a book I was to give them. As I was searching for the book, Panky came in.

"Great work!" I was still munching the grandfather story.

"At your service."

And then it happened. Panky grabbed my hand, pulled me to her and planted a kiss on my lips. Though flustered, I didn't want to look less enterprising. So I planted one on her lips too.

Too late we realized two girls were staring at us through the window. Surely they had seen the kissing.

Putting on a nonchalant air, we leafed through the books – so much as to make the girls think they had merely imagined the kissing scene.

"Are you sure you want the money back now?" Panky asked suddenly. She meant the amount I had lent her last month to tide over the crisis in her finances. The question caught me unawares. Was it merely an attempt to make conversation to get over the embarrassment of the students catching us red-handed enacting the indoor love scene? Out of the corner of my eyes I saw the students were still there, waiting for further developments.

"Not particularly."

What is in a kiss, I thought philosophically. Even if the girls went to town with the story, there was no evidence. Kisses leave no traces. And, after all, we were not naughty little children to be hauled up before the Headmaster.

By Avvokker's Grace

“Has your family grown recently?” Vasu the Sanskrit teacher asked Moosa the Arabic teacher.

“Not as far as I know”, Moosa returned. “But I’ll check with the missus if you want to know.”

“Ha, ha! The old gag about what the DEO said to the teacher. But I didn’t have your progeny in mind. I was thinking of your dedicated young scholars.”

Vasu and Moosa were frantic. They had managed a part-time appointment by getting a dozen students each to opt for Sanskrit and Arabic as second languages. Now the battle for a full-time post was on. For that both needed a package of at least 53 students in the Eighth, 12 in the Ninth and 10 in the Tenth. Engineering defections from Malayalam was the easiest way. And they had both tried it in earnest, at least till Kurup Mash gave them an earful. “None of them can write even their names properly in Malayalam, their mother tongue”, he had sneered. “And you go about seducing them with your Sanskrit and Arabic.”

That was too much for Moosa. “If you don’t know, the practice of writing names exists in Sanskrit and Arabic too. And if you are keen on them writing in Malayalam, you can make them do it when you are teaching them Malayalam for Paper II.”

But Vasu and Moosa were not the only ones who felt threatened. Viswan too would get the axe, unless he hunted up some students immediately. Protection was an obsolete dream. Going back to the old ‘parallel college’ was out of question. Parallel colleges were mushrooming all over the place. And the better off parallel colleges had recently developed the habit of splitting regularly like unicellular organisms. Thus “Budha College” split giving birth to “Sri Budha College”, “Indian College” spawned “New Indian College” and so on. There were enough teachers and more to spare in each one of them. The rarer commodity was students.

Viswan was desperate to dig in at the school. It had cost him three lakh rupees and the recommendations from at least a dozen people who mattered to get the job. Now his benefactors had to be students. So he would frequently round up the duller ones by turns and make his plea: “Don’t you miss a single class. If the DEO comes for inspection and does not find you around your teachers will be done for.”

Then the first students' strike of the year fell on the wary teachers like a thunderbolt. A strike meant thin attendance in many classes. The senior teachers would not be affected by a fall in students' strength. But despite the fact that a strike meant a string of holidays, and that it was, for many of them, the right time for supervising farming operations on their land, the seniors were moved by their younger colleagues' plight. In an emergency meeting convened by Subhadrakkutty Amma, the headmistress it was unanimously decided that the students' leaders should be consulted on the issue.

The strike had no international or national ramifications. A certain Pokken had thrashed a certain Kannan in broad daylight on the road. Neither of them were students. It was only a squabble in the market between two porters in which some local politicians and their student stooges had some interest. They wanted Pokken arrested. If he was not, no school in the area would be allowed to run any class.

Viswan tried conciliatory tactics. "You see, Pokker-kka", he addressed Pokker, one of the student leaders with all the respect he could muster, "This is the time for inspections. The DEO may look in any day. The strike will upset everything." But the lean and mean Pokker was not impressed. "That's your problem. What do *we* have to do with inspections?" Normally, Subhadrakkutty Amma dreaded the sight of Pokker. Now she too attempted conciliation. "Shall we just have a state-wide token strike for a day and leave it at that." "Token strike, phooey!" Pokker snorted. "This is a local issue and we know how to tackle it. If what you want is a state-wide strike, I'll contact the State Committee and make it a state issue."

Pokker then proceeded to make a little speech. "Ma'am, I'm sure you do not know what people's power means. Nobody can arrest the groundswell of people's movements. Remember what happened to Hitler and Mussolini. It's all there in the social studies text book for the Tenth. Vishwan sir is new to the school. He might have his blind spots. But, you, madam . . . " Subhadrakkutty Amma almost passed out. This was her second defeat of the year. The first was when she went to observe a class conducted by Mukundan, a new recruit. "Why did Ma'am sit at the back with us, sir?", a curious student had asked Mukundan when Subhadrakkutty Amma had left. "She teaches Maths, you know", Mukundan had replied. "She doesn't know much about science. Probably she finds my class useful". Subhadrakkutty Amma learned about Mukundan's stab-in-the-back only when one of the students offered to help her along by lending her his "Students'

Guide to Science.” There was no difference between students and teachers when it came to skullduggery!

The strike ended only when the teachers did everything in their power to placate the local politicians. Having learned about the date of the DEO’s visit through the grapevine, they promptly set out on the morning of the D-day on their student-hunting expedition. The task of rounding up Avvokker (Aboobacker) fell on Sadanandan and Shaila. Avvokker’s father Kalanthan worked in Dubai. It was only a matter of time before Avvokker got his visa to join his father. But his presence at the school today was vital.

Avvokker was perched on the branch of a cashew tree when his mentors arrived. He had to be brought down at any cost. But Avvokker had other ideas. He climbed higher as he saw Sadanandan and Shaila. But Avvokker’s mother was a kind woman. As soon as she saw the teachers she hollered: “Avvokker, come down, will you. Do you want your poor teachers to lose their jobs?”

Sukumaran Makes a Point

“What are we supposed to scribble on the paper?”

The question came from Sukumaran who was often addressed reverently as “Sukumaran-ettan” by everybody at school, including his teachers. The question threw Raman Mash into a quandary.

Sukumaran could not be taken lightly. He had always been the centre of attention – right from his Upper Primary days. When the noon-meal scheme was introduced, Sukumaran contributed in a big way to make it a grand success. Minutes before the students were to be served kanji, Sukumaran was seen perched on one of the higher branches of the jackfruit tree which stood in Kunhabdulla Haji’s compound adjoining the school wall, arching benevolently over the wall to give shade for the young scholars of the school to play. With a triumphant grin on his face, Sukumaran deftly plucked the large leaves one after the other and threw them down. They would be rolled up and stitched to make improvised spoons for the students to drink kanji. Kunhabdulla Haji gazed at the denuded branches and sighed. “Throw the used leafs under the coconut palms. Its good fertilizer.”

When Sukumaran was caught copying in the annual exam in his last year at the UP school, Alavi Mash reassured him: “Don’t take all the trouble. We are going to kick you up, anyway. You’ve given us too much trouble already. Let the High School teachers get a taste of you.” And Sukumaran promptly announced his arrival in High School by airing the grouse of his seniors in the Tenth: “Sir, what happened to that English chick Indulekha?”¹

On the day classes began at the Navodaya Vidyalaya, temporarily housed in one of the school’s buildings, Sukumaran made a real scene. It happened during the mid-morning recess when the bright Navodaya scholars were having their tea and snacks. “Why do you give tea and biscuits only to those swells? We are not fasting.” The outburst was in the presence of a large number of his schoolmates who had gathered to watch the unusual activity across the yard and gaze longingly at the lucky Navodayites.

Raman Mash somehow mustered the courage for a comeback. “They are not nitwits like you.”

¹ An abridged English translation of O Chandu Menon’s novel *Indulekha* was a non-detailed textbook in the Tenth. In the year it was introduced, the books were printed and distributed quite late in the academic year.

“All right. But why make a show of it? To make our mouths water?” Sukumaran would not leave it at that. “Give us tea and biscuits and we’ll show you who we are. And don’t call us all nitwits. Take Manoj. He’s worth ten of those swells. He comes to school in the morning on most days on an empty stomach. But look at the marks he scores in every exam. At least *he* should get your tea and biscuits.”

Now Sukumaran wanted to know what he was to scribble on the answer sheet in the exam. He had a point. You could have brushed aside Sukumaran’s words as drivel. But not when Manoj - the same Manoj Sukumaran and everybody else at school thought was the brightest student the school had got in recent years - asked the same question. It was Manoj who was instrumental in Anthru Mash writing the following teaching note:

The teacher gives a general idea of parts of speech in English to the students. He then writes the word ‘job’ on the blackboard and tells the class that the word can be assigned to the class ‘noun.’ A student in one of the front rows gets up and remarks that it can also be assigned to the class ‘verb.’ The teacher frowns, but asks the student for examples. The student unfolds the crumpled sheet of an English newspaper. He points to the sentence ‘we have jobbed it backwards’ in a column called “Spruce Up your English.” The teacher nods weakly and collapses into his chair.

The Headmistress did not sign the teaching note. Instead, she told Anthru Mash she would exempt him from writing teaching notes in future and recommend him for the next year’s National Teachers’ Awards. Anthru Mash did not write a teaching note about the class on democracy in ancient Greece in which Manoj asked him how he could call the Greek set-up ‘democracy’ when the slaves who were swarming all over the place had no say in anything.

If the students could close ranks under the leadership of Sukumaran and Manoj, so could their teachers. Dakshayani Amma the headmistress and Devayani Amma the First Assistant never saw eye to eye on anything. Legend has it that they were room-mates when they did their B.Ed in the same college. “I am stuck with a moron for a room-mate”, Dakshayani wrote home after the first week. By a strange co-incidence Devayani also wrote home that she was stuck with a moron for a room-mate. Somehow the story got out and the ‘moron’ label stuck to both. You could reel off the number of things on which they held diametrically

opposite views: On punctuality, on teachers' ethics, on making notebooks . . . The list stretched endlessly.

Now, faced with the looming threat of student power, they ironed out their differences and joined forces against the common enemy. "You need to answer only the questions from the portions taught", they said in a chorus. "Do we write only what is given in the textbook, or can we write what we read in other books too?" Manoj's question was spot on. The teachers' faces clouded again. But Sukumaran came to the rescue. "Do you mean to say we needn't study the portions not taught in class at all?", he asked. "Those portions will be taught before your half-yearly exam", Devayani Teacher clarified.

"Miss, that will be bothering you too much", Sukumaran said with concern. "Suppose we say good-bye to the whole lot?"

One Coach too Many

Aboobacker was crazy about football. Throughout his childhood and adolescence he spent more time playing football than studying. As fate would have it, he ultimately became a PET. That was his mother Pathumma's handiwork – sending her son for a physical education teacher's training course as soon as he scraped through SSLC.

Pathumma was now cruising into her sixties. Although her eyes were still bright, and her ears sharp, she was too weak to do any work at home. But then, she was not expected to. Aboobacker's wife saw to it that she got everything she wanted for the asking. Going by the standards of her generation, Pathumma belonged to the educated elite – she had 'graduated' from primary school.

Recently she told Aboobacker of two long-cherished wishes of hers: to see an oppana and a game in which 'players kicked a ball.' Aboobacker was delighted. He decided to take her to the State Schools' Arts festival and to a match in the Nehru Cup. Pathumma's idea about Nehru Cup was that it was the cup in which Nehru used to drink his tea. She knew all about Nehru. She also knew that Gandhiji's personal belongings were kept in a museum in Delhi. It took Aboobacker quite an effort to convince her that this was a different cup of tea.

The schools' arts festival was a crowded affair. Finding a spot to stand, let alone sit was a tough proposition. You can always find more men around than women, when girls go on stage, Pathumma said loudly to herself. But Aboobacker thought there was nothing wrong in it. Men were more discerning than women, he said. "What do you *discern* when the girls in your school play?", Pathumma shot the question at him with an arch look. Aboobacker smiled sheepishly, like a school boy caught cheating in the exam.

Pathumma had several well-considered remarks to offer on the oppana being performed on the stage. She wondered why the bride was sitting like a stuffed doll. "I think they have forced her into this marriage", Pathumma said, imagining, like Keats about his Grecian urn, that this was for real. "What happened to these girls, I wonder" Pathumma said a little later. "They do it as if they are stepping on hot coals." Soon she grew bored and dozed off. Meanwhile Aboobacker was treated to a more amusing sight – the men in the front rows literally hanging on to the girls' lips.

Aboobacker was a little anxious about the Nehru Cup match. Would Umma sleep through the match, as she did at the schools' arts festival? On second thoughts, Aboobacker thought it unlikely. After all, it was a game in which a ball rolled all the time and two sets of players vied with each other to possess it. You had to keep your eyes on the ball, or you would miss all the action.

Pathumma had certain 'holistic' ideas about games. She thought that Aboobacker, being a 'games teacher' was master of every game on the planet. So she was mildly surprised when some of Aboobacker's colleagues dropped in on a Sunday to play rummy. She watched all the shuffling, dealing and picking of cards curiously. "I don't know who won" she said to Aboobacker after his colleagues had left, "but I wonder how they can beat a teacher like you."

At the Nehru Cup Aboobacker was in his elements. Pathumma was more amused by her son's antics than by what happened on the field. When a free kick came sailing over the defenders' heads and curved into the goal of his favourite team, Aboobacker leaped up from his seat and roared: "Come on, take it!" The goalkeeper dived into the air obligingly and grabbed the ball neatly.

The ball was now at the other end of the field. One of the forwards advanced menacingly towards the goal, dribbling his way through a cordon of defenders. As he entered the penalty box, Aboobacker shouted: "Shoot!" The forward wasted no time and shot the ball neatly into the corner of the net, past the diving goalkeeper.

In his excitement, Aboobacker did not see the frown on Pathumma's face. Pressing home the advantage, the team that scored the goal organized several raids on the opponents' goal mouth. When a corner kick appeared to curve into the goal, Aboobacker jumped up in joy. But before he could shout, Pathumma pulled him down into his seat. "Leave them alone, will you. Don't play the teacher here. You can do that at your school."

Tale of a Father and his Daughter

It was the first day in school. The young scholars had to introduce themselves to their teacher. The teacher followed the conventional ritual. He went up to each one of them and waited expectantly as they told him their first names, surnames and the names of their parents. When he reached the second row, the teacher hesitated. The girl sitting at the end was his daughter. The absurdity of the situation struck him. But skipping her would amount to breaking the ritual.

He reached the end of the row and waited. His daughter's silence introduced a discordant note in proceedings. My father is my teacher – the smile on her lips said proudly. Well you know my name, her glittering eyes seemed to tell him. But the teacher could not leave it at that.

“Come on, tell me your name.”

The smile on the girl's lips faded. Her face clouded.

“You don't have a name?”

There was a loud burst of laughter in the classroom. A sullen expression came into the girl's face.

“Sumathi”, she said between gritting teeth.

“Your father's name?”

Sumathi glared at him.

“Why, is your father dead”?, the crude, indiscreet question appeared to be forced on him

Sumathi started whimpering.

A wave of sympathy swept the classroom – poor fatherless girl!

The introduction ritual ended abruptly.

On Buying Cows

Shankaran was enraged. He read the sum Raman Mash had given his little son as homework once more, straining his dim eyes:

“I bought five cows for Rs.500/- each. What is the total sum of money I paid for the cows?”

As his son sat down, pencil in hand, to do the sum, smiling to himself at his teacher's pipedream of buying cows for five hundred rupees, Sankaran wrapped a cape around his shoulders and ran madly towards Raman Mash's house.

“Him and his cows!” he muttered as he ran. “He still owes me forty six rupees, on last month's account at the restaurant. And he has no scruples about buying cows for five hundred rupees!”

The Teacher in His Labyrinth

A private school in our town, a model for academic excellence and educational governance suddenly closed shop. The forty-odd students, the cream of the secondary school students in town, who had passed into the Tenth had no alternative except joining our school. When it was decided to put them all together as one division, we were delighted. We had always had grouses about our students – they were too idle, and too troublesome for our taste. Going to the classrooms was an ordeal for most of us. So we welcomed the newcomers with open arms. Here, at last, was a bunch of young scholars we would really enjoy their learning.

Interestingly, the idea of pooling all the good students into one division was first floated by Kunhikkelu Mash a few days before the bright ones arrived – only to be rejected by the overwhelming majority of teachers (which included me). I had an axe to grind – Kunhikkelu Mash had opposed the idea tooth and nail when I pushed it a couple of years before. His argument that the handful of good students in each division were the only incentive for teachers to engage classes, and that putting them all in one division would be tantamount to turning the other divisions into virtual nightmares was then universally accepted. But this time there was a rethink and the majority of the teachers ultimately came round to accepting Kunhikkelu Mash's suggestion.

In reviving a once rejected proposal, Kunhikkelu Mash, we soon learned, was motivated by more than academic interest. His son Kunhikkannan, now in the Tenth was not particularly remarkable for his studies. Kunhikkelu Mash wanted to squeeze him into the ace division. As a student in the privileged division he would get the special attention of teachers, besides being influenced by his smart peers. Getting into the prized division was Kunhikkannan's only hope of beating his inevitable fate of failing the Board Exams.

Teachers' children were generally good at studies. But Kunhikkannan was an exception. Which was why Kunhikkelu Mash had put him in our school in the first place. He thought, naturally, that he had to keep an eye on his son. Otherwise, he would have put Kunhikkannan in one of the prestigious private schools where students' politics was unheard of. It was an open secret that the children of sixteen teachers of the school, including mine, were studying in the better-off private schools. This was revealed in a survey taken in the face of several teachers in our school being threatened with the sack because of falling

students' enrollment. In fact, three among the new bunch were our teachers' progeny – Chathu Mash's daughter Lily, Zubair Mash's son Faisal and Lucose Mash's daughter Rosamma.

Kunhikkelu Mash and Kunhikkannan were a study in contrast. Kunhikkelu Mash was so broadminded as to take a membership in both the rival teachers' organizations, PSTA and KPTU. When the 'duplicity' was discovered, both organizations were unanimous in expelling Kunhikkelu Mash from their ranks. Undaunted, Kunhikkelu Mash continued to demonstrate his broadmindedness by earnestly participating in the strikes organized by both organizations. But Kunhikkannan was a narrow-minded bigot who clung fanatically to one of the students' organizations which operated in the school, raising himself to its leadership through steadfast devotion to its policies and programmes.

In staffroom parlance, Kunhikkannan was often referred to as "Kunhikkannan Mash." I thought he deserved a little more respect and referred to him as "Kunhikkann-ettan Mash." For the last several years Kunhikkannan was the oldest student in the classes he studied – and the strongest. He was strong enough to beat any teacher in the school, including his father, to pulp if the urge came to him. Not surprisingly, several of his candidates in the students' elections sailed through unopposed.

There were historical reasons for my holding Kunhikkannan in great awe. It happened last year at a cinema in town. As my wife, daughter and I took up the rear in the queue, I spotted Kunhikkannan and his gang sitting on the iron bars next to the counter. Most of them were smoking. One of them had seen me too. "Don't look now. That's our Mash", one of them whispered as he dropped the cigarette. The others too promptly dropped their cigarettes. It was then that Kunhikkannan got a good look at me. "Oh, Ibrahimkutty", I heard him say, "he doesn't teach us. What a waste of good fag!" He bent down, retrieved the cigarette and took a long puff. You can imagine the sorry figure I cut. Even the most worthless man is a demi-god to his wife and children – till someone like Kunhikkannan cuts him to size.

When Kunhikkelu Mash made the expected plea for putting Kunhikkannan in the prized division, we were in a dilemma. Here was a senior teacher playing foul. But there was a frankness in his approach which was disarming. And nobody could ignore the helpless father's desperation in his move. So Kunhikkannan ultimately ended up in the starred division.

When the Headmaster summoned me that bright morning I hadn't the faintest idea that I would be given charge of Tenth-B. I was delighted. Never mind Kunhikkannettan, I was going to enjoy teaching this bunch. The new bunch from the closed-down coaching centre were the cynosures of all eyes, neatly dressed in their starched uniforms. For most of our students, uniforms were things they had only heard of or seen others wearing.

As I walked to the classroom with the attendance register clutched under my arm, I imagined the jealous eyes of my colleagues following me.

Normally the routine was to be greeted by deliberately loud whispers announcing your name preceded or followed by one or more of the nicknames the students were generous in handing out to teachers. But today, for the first time, as far as I could remember, I was greeted by a well-behaved, welkin-eyed group of students.

"Good morning, sir", they said in a chorus.

"Good morning. Sit down."

Impressed by the impeccable behavior of the young scholars it took me a moment to notice Kunhikkannan – who was noticeable, in his mundu and shirt, as the only one not in uniform – sitting in one of the back rows. He looked like a fish out of water. When he saw my eyes falling on the small booklet of receipts for his organization's fund collection drive on the desk, he hurriedly pushed it under.

I recorded the attendance, calling the names one after the other, trying to store them in my memory. As it was the first day in the school calendar, classes were to be let off after the first period. The class teachers were supposed to give a general introduction on their subjects. I started reeling off the usual rigmarole about Malayalam language and literature when disaster struck. One of the boys, Dileep suddenly stood up with a question.

"Sir, you said *Indulekha* is the first novel in Malayalam. What about *Pullelikunju* and *Aalmarattam*?"

I stared at Dileep in horror. What were the *Pullelikunju* and *Almarattam* he was talking about? Ignorance could be bliss, but not for a teacher before his students. I took the standard way out. "That is a wonderful question. But we need more time to discuss that" I said looking at my watch. That was a close shave!

As I dismissed the class and walked towards the staff room, I decided to find out from Zubair or Ramu something about those two confounded novels that had nearly landed me in the soup. Ramu and Zubair were our walking encyclopedias.

There was nothing under the sun or beyond it they didn't know about. But I had to get it out of them before the next class.

Zubair, who was pro-government was engaged in a fierce debate with Chacko over a recent decision of the government on protecting the services of teachers who became surplus. Zubair thought it was a bold move on the part of the government to employ the surplus teachers in the same schools where they worked, while Chacko dismissed it as yet another instance of the Government's collusion with the managements of aided schools. Chathu Mash who came in to the staff room at this point threw his weight behind Zubair and asked Chacko with a sneer if he would describe the decision to grant two installments of dearness allowance to teachers also as 'collusion.' This did not go well with Chacko who told Chathu Mash that the issue was not as simple as his business in coconuts. It was well known that Chathu Mash lend money on the side and ran a roaring business in coconuts plucked from the plots of land mortgaged to him on loans.

It was some time before I could get Zubair alone to clear my doubts. "Didn't you see the article on early novels in Malayalam that appeared in a weekly last month? All one can say is that *Kundalatha* is the first *original* novel in Malayalam."

In the next class Kunhikkannan, in an earnest effort to mend his ways, provided some good entertainment by mixing up *Kundalatha* and its author Appu Nedungadi.

"Sir, you mean to say there was no novel in Malayalam before Kunda Nedungadi's *Appulatha*?", he asked me innocently.

There was a roar of laughter and Kunhikkannan, for the first time in his student-life, saw himself laughed at. Events had overtaken him.

I explained, rather pompously, that *Kundalatha* was the first original novel in Malayalam. Before *Kundalatha* appeared, there were only translations.

As I moved on to "*Paramartham*"¹, I ran into trouble again. My mistake was in regurgitating the old cliché – that Kunhiraman Nayanar could be called the Mark Twain of Malayalam literature.

"Sir, who is Mark Twain?" It was that bright young thing Dileep, again.

¹"*Paramartham*" (The Truth) - A story by Vengayil Kunhiraman Nayanar (1861-1914), an early fictionist and prose writer in Malayalam.

“Mark Twain is an American Writer”, I answered. That was all I knew about Mark Twain. I had got it from the teachers’ handbook. I looked uneasily at the some of the wannabes. If more questions on the blighter came, I was sunk. Before long one came.

“What did he write, sir, poetry, fiction or drama?” That was from Mohanan. That was the last straw. It had to stop.

“Don’t jump the gun. I’ll tell you everything you need to know.”

Mohanan sat down, frightened by my stentorian voice.

Suddenly I felt ashamed of myself. Surely, there were more decent ways of putting students in their places when you were at a loss to answer their questions.

“If you have more doubts, meet me in the staff room after the class.”

I knew that none of them were would dare to come to the staff room with doubts. If anyone did, that would be the last time. We teachers knew how to handle students who babbled things they had no business about. I went on with the class confidently.

Imagine my astonishment when Mohan, accompanied by Kunhikkannan came to see me in the Staff room during the recess. I became a little uneasy.

“Well, what is up young men?” I said with forced joviality.

“Sir, I want to know more about Mark Twain” Mohanan said politely.

Mohanan’s question had me cornered. Both Chathu Mash and Abdur Rahman Mash were mildly amused. Chathu Mash looked curiously at Mohanan.

“I’ll tell you more about him in class tomorrow”, I said choosing the only way out.

“But, sir”, Kunhikkannan protested. “You asked us to come to the staff room . . . “

“I will explain everything tomorrow, linking it with the context. Now be off, like a good boy.” I patted Kunhikkannan gently on his shoulder.

“Please, sir”, Kunhikkannan pleaded, “We badly want to know more about Mark Twain.”

Pulling my leg, the rascal, I said to myself as I watched them go.

I learned from Ramu later that Mark Twain was mostly a fictionist.

“Mark Twain was a fictionist”, I announced triumphantly in class the next day.

“Sir, is Mark Twain his real name?”

Not again! I glanced uneasily at the watch. The end of the period was far, far away.

“Why do you think it is not real?”

“Daddy told me ‘Mark Twain’ is actually the pen name of Samuel Langhorne Clemens.”

Molly’s father taught English at the University.

“Exactly, although it sounds like a real name. Very Good.”

By the skin of the teeth!

“Sir, What was the name, again?”, Kunhikkannan asked earnestly. “I want to take it down.”

Hell! I could not remember the name. But I had a brain wave.

“Molly, write it on the blackboard for him.”

Molly wrote the name on the blackboard in her neat handwriting.

Suddenly I became apprehensive. What if Molly had got it wrong? Luckily I had another brain wave.

“Taking it down is all right. But you should crosscheck to find out if Molly has got it right. You should have a relentless spirit of inquiry if you want to come up in life.”

There were no more problems that day. But the young scholars of Tenth-B tormented me with questions in almost every class after that. I never had the habit of preparing in advance for a class. Now it appeared that no amount of preparation could save me from the slings and arrows of this outrageous bunch. On top of everything there was a circular from the Principal asking us to submit our teaching notes every Monday. I could not recollect when I had last written a teaching note. I soon discovered that Tenth-B had turned into a nightmare for all teachers who engaged it – except Zubair and Ramu

“Tenth- B is the only class where I get some satisfaction as a teacher”, Zubair said with glowing pride.

“Old man”, Abdur Rahman said to me later, “We are in the soup now. Serves us right - shooting our mouths off about getting lazy hobos for students. Now, look at what we have got. Makes us long for the good old days, doesn’t it? Zubair is nuts.”

But it was the story of Kunhikkannan’s transformation that really made news. He created a sensation by bringing to school adaptations of Ramayana and

Mahabharatha instead of his organization's pamphlets. Kunhikkelu Mash was overjoyed. Kunhikkannan had done precious little to make his father proud of him.

"I knew it", Kunhikkelu Mash said beaming at us. "It all depends on the company you keep. It rubs off on you."

But Kunhikkannan's most dramatic performance came a few days later when I was teaching *Padakkalathile Abhimanyu*.² When I made the prefatory remark that Abhimanyu was Arjun's son, Dileep stood up and shot a question at me: "Sir, but wasn't Abhimanyu also the re-incarnation of Varchas, the son of Chandra the moon-god?"

I stared pathetically at Dileep. That was the fourth question of the day for which I did not have an answer ready.

There was a hail of questions after that.

"Why did Arjuna give Uthara to Abhimanyu?"

"Was it predestined that Abhimanyu would die at the age of sixteen?"

"Why did not Krishna save Abhimanyu from death in the battlefield?"

As usual I sought the only way out – a promise to "explain everything in detail" the next day, hoping against hope for a manna in the wilderness - a students' strike.

But Kunhikkannan, it turned out, was not the one to let things drift.

"Sir, will you explain in detail tomorrow if Abhimanyu was Chandra's son?" The sardonic tone was unmistakable. There was loud laughter in the class. I stared at Kunhikkannan, licking my dry lips.

But Kunhikkannan had had enough. He got up from his seat abruptly, walked up to me in two strides and took hold of my hand.

"Sir, that will do. You can sit with us for a change."

Kunhikkannan took me to the boys' section and made me sit in one of the back rows. I sat down meekly. Kunhikkannan then turned to Mohanan.

"Mohanan, come on, you take over now."

Mohanan hesitated only for a fraction of a second, before he took a piece of chalk, walked to the blackboard and wrote neatly on the top: *Padakkalathile Abhimanyu*. I stared at Mohanan through misty eyes as he began to read the text and explain it.

² An extract from a prose adaptation of the *Mahabharatha* in which the tragic death of Abhimanyu, son of Arjun encircled by the Kaurava forces in a *padmavyuha*, a lotus like formation, in the battlefield is described.

The students, led by Mohanan and Kunhikkannan the second-in-command encircled me in a lotus-like formation. Like Abhimanyu I was trapped in a *padmavyuha* from which I could not hope to escape.

Glossary

A List – The list of regular students who are to appear in the SSLC examinations from the school

Aided Schools – Schools owned or managed by individuals or trusts which get grants from the government. The government also pays the salaries of the teachers working in these schools.

All- promotion – the policy of promoting students automatically from Standard I to Standard VIII in Government and aided schools , regardless of their performance, which is being strictly implemented from the mid-Seventies of the last century.

Centralised valuation – Centralized assessment of papers of public examinations by teachers, as distinct from ‘home assessment’.

DEO, AEO – District Education Officer, Assistant Education Officer, school teachers’ local demi-gods in Kerala.

First Assistant – A Senior teacher who stands in for the Headmaster.

GO – Government Order

KER – Kerala Education Rules, the Bible of school teachers and employees of Kerala’s Department of Education.

Navodaya Schools – A string of residential schools, one for each district, set up in the country after the adoption of the ‘New Education Policy’ in 1986 to identify and provide intensive and multi-focal training to talented students.

Parallel Colleges – coaching centres where students who register for private study under universities were taught.

PSC – Public Service Commission, the apex body for making appointments in government departments.

Protection – protection of service offered to teachers who become surplus due to falling student strength in the schools they work in. The terms of protection have been watered down considerably over the years.

Substitution: standing in for teachers who are on leave.



STORIES
AKBAR KAKKATTIL

Translated by
K M SHERRIF

THE TEACHER IN HIS LABYRINTH

These stories are both school lore
and documents
of school life in God's Own
Country. Coming from a
teacher who was in the thick of
the action, many
of them are also, perhaps,
fictionalized memoirs.

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